

The Last Tsar

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*It is better to abolish serfdom from above than wait for it to
abolish itself from below.*

Tsar Alexander II

My Grandfather: A National Hero

On this, the fiftieth anniversary of his untimely death, I have been asked by the *New Literary Gazette* to share a few recollections of the life of my grandfather Gennady Ilych Kramnik. As I have grown older, memories have faded, but I still remember enough to pay tribute to my beloved *dedushka*, who was as much a personal hero to me as he is to Mother Russia.

My most important reminiscence is an early one, for it dates back to 1858, when I was a six-year-old lad. That spring, my grandfather took me to a performance of Mikhail Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* at the Bolshoi Kammeny Theater in Saint Petersburg. Glinka had died the year before and there were commemorative performances of his operas throughout Russia. My mother remonstrated with her father-in-law for taking only me to see the opera and keeping the rest of the family at home: "We should all go and pay our respects to the late great Glinka," she argued.

"Galina, my dear," replied my grandfather soberly. "Tickets at the Kammeny are very expensive, and all I could afford were two of the cheapest ones, in the upper gallery where the sparrows nest. The hero's son Vanya is an important character in the story and I want my grandson to see his namesake in action and learn the importance of being patriotic."

My grandfather Gennady Ilych Kramnik was a bear of a man, tall and full-bearded, with a gravelly voice that commanded immediate respect. By then, he was already a member of the famous Leib Guard, the personal guards of Tsar Alexander II, and was for that reason respected by his colleagues and feared more than a little at home, where his decisions were law.

So, we went together to the opera, a first-time experience for me.

I was bored through most of the performance. However, in the third act, the hero Ivan Susanin sends his adopted son Vanya to warn the tsar that a contingent of Polish soldiers is on a deadly search for him; meanwhile, Susanin misleads the assailants into following him through remote woods. The suspense in the opera's plot kept me awake during the fourth act, in which Vanya reaches a monastery and alerts the monks to spirit the tsar away, and in the meantime Susanin keeps the Poles off the right track. At the end, Susanin's ruse is discovered and he is put to death.

At that point in the opera, as Susanin is about to be killed, he sings an aria about his willingness to face death, since as doing so will have made it possible for the tsar to survive. My *dedushka* squeezed my shoulder so hard that I winced in pain. Choking with emotion, he declared: "Vanya, I swear, I would like nothing more than to give my life for our Tsar, as Susanin did." I could have never imagined that this wish would eventually come to be realized in a most dramatic fashion.

The concept of patriotism was rather vague for me then, but kept being reinforced by my *dedushka* as I grew older. He was of the true Russian country stock that might suffer indignities at the hands of the aristocrats and landed gentry but would never waver in their love for the Motherland.

Like his ancestors, he grew up on a farm in Yelets, in the Russian heartland, a member of a penniless family of serfs. Like thousands of others, they were emancipated by the Tsar in 1861. Thereafter, my grandfather would visit his kin in Yelets and regale them with tales of his service to Alexander the Liberator.

Later on, Tsar Alexander stayed the reform course, but one action that benefitted my grandfather in particular was the appointment of Dmitry Alekseyevitch Milyutin as Minister of War in 1861.

My grandfather and Milyutin had become acquainted when they served in the Caucasian War. Milyutin was impressed with my grandfather's courage, loyalty, and skill, and recommended to the Tsar that he be promoted from the Leib Guard to join the Cossack Escort, the regiment that provided personal security for the Tsar. At the time, almost all the members of the Escort were Cossacks from Terek and Kuban, thus including my *dedushka*, not a Cossack, in the regiment was a high honor that made him even more beholden to Alexander II and Milyutin.

Our contacts became less frequent after he joined the Escort, for he travelled constantly throughout Russia accompanying the Tsar during the sovereign's frequent visits to all parts of our vast nation. Whenever he came to visit us, he would keep us enthralled with descriptions of the multitude of peoples and lifestyles of both the European and trans-Uralian parts of the country. All throughout those years, he never ceased to sing the praises of our beautiful land and its beloved ruler.



Despite his many reforms – or perhaps because of them – Alexander II was the focus of many attempts on his life by radical fanatics. Unsuccessful attempts to assassinate him were made in 1866, 1867, 1879 and 1880, the last two the work of a socialist group known as the *Narodnaya Volya*, whose aim was to overthrow the government by eliminating its leaders. My grandfather narrowly escaped the 1880 attempt, in which Stephan Khalturin, a member of the cell, set off a time bomb in the guards' quarters one floor below the dining room in the Winter Palace. The explosion killed eleven people and wounded thirty others, including my *dedushka*, but failed to achieve its aim of killing Alexander II because the Tsar and his family were not in the dining room at the time. My grandfather suffered minor shrapnel wounds on the chest and left arm, but was otherwise unharmed and was decorated by the Tsar, as were other guards injured in the attack. The Tsar appointed Count Loris-Melikov as head of a Supreme Executive Commission charged with identifying and neutralizing the threats posed by so-called revolutionaries, and the Commission was in its initial stages of organization when the final attempt on the Tsar's life was made on March 13, 1881.

On that fateful day, one of the *Narodnaya Volya* members, Nikolai Rysakov, threw a bomb under the Tsar's carriage as it traversed the Catherine Canal over St. Petersburg's Pevchesky Bridge. My grandfather was one of six Cossack guards who at the time were riding in formation escorting the Tsar's carriage. One of the guards was killed in the explosion, as were the carriage driver and several bystanders. The carriage was bulletproof and was undamaged, and continued to proceed driverless for a few yards until it came to a stop against the bridge's railing.

The Tsar emerged from the vehicle and started to head back towards the explosion's location. My grandfather and other guards dismounted their horses and tried to persuade him to return to the carriage, but Alexander seemed unable to hear and stood, dazed, in the middle of the bridge. At that point, a second member of *Narodnaya Volya*, Ignacy Hryniewiecki, tossed another bomb at the Tsar's feet. My grandfather, who was standing by the sovereign's side, reacted with blinding speed: he threw himself to the ground, covering the exploding bomb and sheltering Alexander, who escaped with only minor wounds to the body.

My *dedushka* was essentially torn to bits by the explosion. His chest and stomach were blown open and his legs were severed; his face was terribly mutilated and unrecognizable. He was placed on the snow, on the side of the bridge, in mortal agony. A pastor from the Saint Isaac's Cathedral who was at the end of the bridge watching the Tsar's procession rushed to his side and gave him the last rites.

According to the pastor, my grandfather was gasping for air, taking his last few breaths before leaving this Earth. Although his words were garbled and almost inaudible, he managed to ask whether the Tsar was safe and when the pastor confirmed this he said “thank you, O Lord” as the remnant of his face smoothed into a beatific smile. And with that, he passed away.

The past five decades have proved my grandfather’s supreme sacrifice to have been worthwhile. Alexander II remained Tsar for twelve more years, during which he carried out extensive economic, legal and social reforms, such as the constitutional changes implemented in 1882. At the end of his reign, he voluntarily renounced the throne upon turning 75 in 1893. At the same time, the monarchy was abolished and the Russian Republic began its existence.

Alexander also came down hard on the left-wing conspirators that had tried to assassinate him and overthrow his regime. Count Loris-Melikov’s Supreme Executive Commission was implacable in pursuing the *Narodnaya Volya* and other radical groups. When the writings of Karl Marx circulated and began to be espoused by the Russian intellectual elites, the Commission rounded up socialist radicals by the thousands, executed their leaders, sent the captured rank-and-file members into exile in Siberia, and banned entry into Russia of radicals from abroad. As a result, Russia has been spared the class struggles that have taken place in Germany and France, among other countries. We have no communists here.

Partly as a consequence of the elimination of radical opponents, the transition from an Empire to a Republic proceeded without significant opposition except for the nobility and members of the Tsar’s immediate family. Alexander Alexandrovitch, who would have succeeded his father on Russia’s throne, received a very generous pension granted to him by the State, and ended his life in luxury, in a villa in Italy. Similar payments to other members of the Romanov family and the nobility were a drain on Russia’s coffers, but allowed the peaceful handover of state powers to a Federal Assembly led by a Prime Minister, not unlike counterparts in Great Britain and other Western powers.

I will add briefly that the success of the Russian Republic, itself the fruit of Tsar Alexander II’s reforms, has been partly due to the country’s governance by Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (popularly known as Maxim Gorky), a brilliant writer who became, in 1898, the youngest Prime Minister of the Republic. Gorky, who in his early years had been associated with the socialist movement, became less radical when elected to be Prime Minister. He believed in the power of diplomacy and in 1904 avoided a costly war with Japan by engineering a territorial swap under which Russia would maintain dominance over Manchuria while Japan controlled Korea. He kept Russia at peace and prosperity for another decade so that the country was united when war broke out between the Triple Entente and the Central Powers. Russia was a key player in defeating the Germans in what became known as the Great War.

After the end of hostilities, a peace conference was convened in Paris, lasting between 1919 and 1920. At the talks, Gorky mediated between U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who desired a lenient peace agreement with Germany, and French prime minister Georges Clemenceau, who was determined to see Germany punished. Through his intervention, while Germany was ordered to pay reparations, the amount was reduced and the time for payment extended to allow Germany to remain viable and recover from the losses suffered through the conflict.

As of this writing, there is still peace in Europe, although turmoil remains in the countries that were defeated in the Great War. I am confident, however, that a democratic Russian Republic will remain untouched by any troubling developments and will maintain the social and economic gains that my grandfather’s selfless sacrifice made possible. Russia will continue to be a positive force for world peace.

Ivan Viktorovich Kramnik, Moscow, March 1931

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